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Alaska fishermen circle their boats to fight mine

The project at the headwaters above Bristol Bay would be the largest open-pit mine in North America. The area is home to enormous salmon runs and majestic scenery – and billions of dollars in minerals.

By Kim Murphy, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Dillingham, Alaska

It is an unfortunate coincidence of geography advertisement
that this lush region of wild rivers, grassy tundra and windy sea is home to two competing treasures of almost unimaginable value: the world's largest sockeye salmon run, supporting a fishery worth \$440 million a year; and in the hills behind it, a massive deposit of copper, molybdenum and gold worth at least \$300 billion.

With that much money at stake, preventing the construction of what could be the largest open-pit mine in North America — at headwaters above Bristol Bay — seems an impossible task.

As Pebble Ltd. Partnership prepares to submit its permit application outlining what kind of mine it wants to build by late this year or early next, Bristol Bay fishermen are fighting a fierce advance assault, hoping to convince government decision-makers and the public that poisonous mine drainage and some of the world's last pristine salmon streams are a combination too risky to contemplate.

"The location could not possibly be worse on the face of the earth," said former state Senate President Rick Halford, a Republican from the Bristol Bay region. "This is a place of incredible value. It's going to be probably the biggest environmental resource fight of our lifetime."

Last week, Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson met with dozens

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of mine opponents at Dillingham High School, where tribal leaders and commercial fishermen began a push to have the EPA wield its veto authority.

For many fishermen here, it is inconceivable that an industrial-scale mine that could produce 8 billion tons of waste is being contemplated in an area home to rare, healthy runs of all five species of salmon. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar this year called the area "simply too special to drill" and placed it off-limits to offshore oil and gas development.

"It is a national treasure that we must protect," Salazar said.

Construction of the mine will bring an unprecedented level of industrial development to a region known until now for its majestic solitude. It will require an 86-mile road and miles of pipelines straddling salmon streams, a deep-water port in Cook Inlet, a power plant capable of generating up to 300 megawatts of electricity and 200 miles of power transmission lines.

Pebble Ltd. Partnership has withdrawn the 2006 permit applications that originally outlined the project, and company officials say they no longer know the scope of what they will propose. The initial plan included an open pit possibly 2 square miles in size, with tailings impoundments of at least 10 square miles, behind embankments up to 740 feet high.

Since then, Pebble has acquired additional land and discovered even more mineral deposits. But the company has hinted that it will limit the size of the project if the environmental risks are too great.

"One of our core operating principles is to be able to demonstrate coexistence with the fishery. It's not going to be one industry at the expense of another," said Mike Heatwole, spokesman for the partnership, a 50-50 venture between London-based global mining company Anglo American and Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd. of Canada.

The Legislature has appropriated \$750,000 for a full scientific review of the project's potential effects on Bristol Bay. In addition, a series of science panels paid for by Pebble is scheduled to begin public meetings in December.

But at last week's meeting with the EPA, many local residents said they feared the meetings were aimed at railroading approval for the mine.

The Pebble Mine is only the largest of several being contemplated on 1.1 million acres of the Bristol Bay watershed.

It would lie near the headwaters of the Kvichak and Nushagak rivers and just north of the 1,000-square-mile Lake Iliamna, nursery of many of the sockeye salmon.

Here in Dillingham and other communities along the bay, many fishermen fear that even a small amount of toxic copper sulfide generated when copper is mined — leached through the porous rock or leaked from a broken pipe — could be fatal to the fish that are their livelihood.

"Every other mine of this size, this type, near water, has contaminated the water. There is not one example they can give us of something this size and this type that hasn't," said Lindsey Bloom, 30, a commercial salmon fisherwoman from Juneau who has been working with the

conservation group Trout Unlimited to fight the mine.

"I don't have problems with mining in Alaska in general," said Katherine Carscallen, a third-generation fisherwoman from Dillingham. "But Pebble isn't really something you can compare to the rest. It's unbelievably huge. All the rest of the mines in Alaska could fit inside Pebble."

Though polls show 80% of Bristol Bay residents opposed to the mine, many residents of the Alaska Native villages closest to the Pebble site, on the shores of Lake Iliamna, have broken ranks with the fishing towns along Bristol Bay and elected to remain neutral until mine operators conduct their studies and make a specific proposal.

They admit they are lured by the promise of 1,000 skilled, high-wage jobs over the 30-year life of the mine, 2,000 additional jobs during construction, and hundreds of millions of dollars in annual operating expenditures.

"Commercial fishing isn't sustaining and supporting our communities. We're basically dying up here," said Lisa Reimers, chief executive of the Iliamna Development Corp., a native-owned venture at Iliamna which has already won some work during Pebble's exploratory operations.

The village lies just 15 miles from the mine site, and Reimers said she and other village leaders conducted their own research, which convinced them that healthy fisheries and mining can coexist.

"We're not pro-Pebble. We're neutral. We're trying to be open-minded about everything in our economy and figure out how our young people are going to support themselves," Reimers said. "Of course we care about the environment. This is our home."

In Dillingham and the surrounding communities, residents are settling in for what they expect will be a long, expensive and intense fight that they are coming to realize could outlast them.

"Our opponents are multinational corporations. They have great advantages. They often pay the most, they hire the best, and they're perpetual. They go on forever. We die. They can work on this kind of project for generations, and they often do," Halford said.

At a celebration for the end of sockeye season July 24 in Dillingham, Curyung tribal chief Tom Tilden, who runs his own salmon boat, warned the community that they must teach their children how to fight the mine.

"It's going to be a long battle," he said afterward. "When you have that kind of wealth laying in the earth, it's eventually going to be dug up."

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